The Miraculous Gifts and the Question of Cessationism

Evangelicals dispute whether the miraculous gifts of the apostolic era continue today (which is called continuationism) or whether they have ceased (which is called cessationism). Pentecostals and charismatics argue for the continuation of the gifts, and such a position has been advocated especially since the early 1900s with the arrival of Pentecostalism and has been furthered by second and third wave charismatics. This article will argue that the miraculous gifts have ceased, especially focusing on the gifts of apostleship, prophecy, healing, miracles, and, to a lesser extent, tongues.

Redemptive History

The miraculous gifts have ceased because they played a particular role in redemptive history in accrediting the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:22; Heb. 2:4). The apostles and those closely associated with them performed "signs and wonders" and miracles to confirm the gospel they proclaimed (Acts 2:43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 14:3; 15:12; Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:12). I am not denying that God in his sovereignty may choose to grant such signs and wonders in cutting-edge missionary ventures today (nor is the argument that God never does miracles today), but such a state of affairs is out of the ordinary. It was vital in the first generation that Christ's ministry and the apostolic word was verified and confirmed. The church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Eph. 2:20). The foundation for the church has been laid once-for-all, and thus there are no longer prophets and apostles functioning as authoritative messengers. As the epistle of Jude (v. 3) says, "the faith … was delivered to the saints once for all." We read in the epistle to the Hebrews that "in these last days … God has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:2). The final and definitive word has been declared, and thus there is no need for apostles and prophets and tongues, nor do we need signs, wonders, and miracles to accredit the message.

The Canon of Scripture

We can put it another way; the canon of Scripture is now closed. As believers we have God's final and definitive word in the twenty-seven books of NT Scripture. No new books will ever be added to the canon, and no new revelation will be given

until the end of history. We await the next great event in redemptive history: the coming of Jesus Christ to consummate the kingdom. Since we have all we need to know as believers about our salvation and sanctification in the Scriptures, no apostles or prophets are needed to declare God's will to us.

This is not to say that 1 Corinthians 13:8–12 teaches that the gifts will cease with the closure of the canon, only to make an argument from redemptive history. When we examine 1 Corinthians 13:8–12 "the perfect" is clearly the second coming of Christ. Continuationists point to these verses to argue that the gifts will continue until the second coming of Christ. Such a reading is of course possible. Still, 1 Corinthians 13:8–12 does not *demand* that the gifts remain until the second coming. We should not be surprised that we don't have any direct teaching about the gifts passing away. Instruction about the cessation of the gifts would not apply to the Corinthians or to Paul since they lived in the time period when all the gifts were active. The Lord spoke to them in the period and circumstances in which they lived. Similarly, we believe in a canon of Scripture, but the NT says nothing explicitly about such a canon since it would mean nothing to the first generation of Christians.

Argument from Apostleship and Prophecy

It was noted above that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Eph. 2:20). There is no apostolic succession in the NT, and thus the gift of apostleship has ceased. When James the apostle is put to death in Acts 12:2, he is not replaced as an apostle. Paul is the "last" apostle of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:8), and there have been no apostles since Paul. The apostles were necessary in the first generation to testify to Jesus Christ since the Christian movement was new. Now that the foundation has been laid, the days of the apostles have ended. We have the faith handed down to us once-for-all, as noted above (Jude 3; Heb. 1:2).

It is instructive that the church is built on both apostles *and prophets*. The prophets Paul has in mind in Ephesians 2:20 are clearly NT prophets (see Eph. 3:5). Both apostles and prophets laid the foundation for the church, and since the foundation is established, there are no prophets speaking the authoritative word of God today. We look to the canon of Scripture as our final and sole authority.

No Mistakes in NT Prophecy

Some take issue with the argument about the cessation of prophecy, claiming that NT prophecy still exists today (for further discussion on the nature of prophecy,

see the article on “prophecy”). They argue that the words of NT prophets are mixed with error, and thus the gift of prophecy still exists today, and it is not inherently authoritative and infallible. Two arguments supporting the notion that there are errors in prophecy will be mentioned here. First, those who think prophets can err say that believers are encouraged to assess *prophecies* for mistakes, and they do not judge the authenticity of the prophets themselves. Second, Agabus functions as an example of a prophet who made a mistake when he said that the Jews would tie Paul up and hand him over to the Romans (Acts 21:11), but that is not what happened. Instead, the Jews tried to kill Paul, and the Romans rescued him from their hands (Acts 21:31–36). However, there is good reason to doubt the notion that prophecy is mixed with errors is mistaken, and thus there is no basis for seeing the gift of prophecy as present today.

1. The burden of proof is on those who say that NT prophecy differs from OT prophecy. We see in Deuteronomy 18 that the mark of true prophets is that their prophecies come true. If their prophecies contain errors, they are to be rejected as false prophets. Jeremiah says false prophets prophesy “a lie in my name” and “a false vision” (Jer. 14:14). Ezekiel indicts prophets “who see false visions and speak lying divinations” (Ezek. 13:9). It is clear, then, that OT prophecy was infallible and flawless, and the most natural conclusion is that the same applies to NT prophecy.
2. Those who support the notion that NT prophecies are mixed with error, either in the reception or transmission of the prophecies, say that in 1 Thessalonians 5:19–20 and 1 Corinthians 14:29ff it is the *prophecies* that are judged, not the *prophets*. The prophets, according to this reading, are not excluded as false prophets if they err. The prophecies are sifted and *the errors in the prophecy* are rejected, not the prophets themselves. This attempt to distinguish NT from OT prophecy is not persuasive because the only way to determine whether one is true prophet, both in the OT and the NT, is by assessing their *prophecies*. The standard in the OT and the NT is the same. Paul tells the church to evaluate prophecies because the church distinguished between true and false prophets by assessing their prophecies.
3. Jesus warns about the danger of “false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravaging wolves” (Matt. 7:15). He warns us that “many false prophets will rise up and deceive many” (Matt. 24:11). Peter admonishes the church to be on guard against “false prophets” and “false teachers” (2 Pet. 2:1). John tells us not to “believe every spirit” but to “test the spirits to see if they are from God” (1 John 4:1). The church must discern what is false and what is true, and such an activity is crucial because there

were as John tells us *many* false prophets in the world. If NT prophets make mistakes, then discerning who the false prophets are becomes impossible.

4. We have no credible example in the NT of true prophets making mistakes. When Agabus prophesies that there will be a famine in Acts 11, his prophecy comes true. In the same way, Agabus's prophecy about Paul being bound and handed over to the Romans in Acts 21:11 was not mistaken. Those who see errors in NT prophecies say that the events didn't turn out as Agabus prophesied since Paul was *rescued* from the Jews, not *handed* over by them. But when Paul recounts to the Jews in Jerusalem what happened to him in Rome, he uses the very word "handed over" (Acts 28:17, *paradothēn* from *paradidōmi*) that Agabus used in making the prophecy (Acts 21:11). We can conclude from this that Luke believed Agabus wasn't mistaken.

Agabus demonstrates that he is a prophet, by using prophetic symbolism, which was typical of OT prophets, when he takes Paul's belt and ties his hands and feet. Agabus's genuineness as a prophet is also attested by the prophetic formula he uses, when he declares, "This is what the Holy Spirit says." The word *tade* translated "this" is used hundreds of times in the OT for the authoritative words of the prophets. Luke uses this formula to underscore that Agabus speaks by the Holy Spirit, just as the OT prophets did.

Perhaps the most difficult text for those who think prophecy in the New Testament is infallible is Acts 21:4 and 21:12–13. Paul's friends tell him not to go to Jerusalem "through the Spirit" since it is predicted that he will suffer there, but Paul insists on going to Jerusalem and claims that he is led by the Spirit in his decision (Acts 19:21–22). Those who think New Testament prophecy is mixed with error say we have a clear example here of an error in prophecy. This interpretation is certainly possible. But another reading of the evidence is more compelling, and this reading supports the notion that New Testament prophecies are infallible.

In Acts 21:4 the prophecy is correct (Paul would suffer), but the inference drawn from the prophecy (Paul shouldn't go to Jerusalem) is mistaken. The inference drawn from the prophecy was not part of the prophecy itself. Thus, the prophecy that Paul would face suffering in Jerusalem was accurate and Spirit-inspired; the conclusion that people drew from the prophecy—that Paul should not travel to Jerusalem—was mistaken. It did not derive from the Spirit. It wasn't Luke's purpose to be precise about the nature of prophecy here, and he assumed that his readers would realize that prophecy is never in error. We have to realize that the purpose of the story was not to reflect on the nature of prophecy. We can't demand more of the account than is warranted.

Summing Up

The miraculous gifts have ceased since they attest to the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The foundation of the church has been laid and is now preserved in the Scriptures, the canon of the OT and the NT. We do not expect any new revelation. We haven't said much here about the gift of tongues, but the evidence in the NT is that the gift of tongues is speaking in foreign languages, not ecstatic utterances. We have no evidence that people are receiving such a gift today, and interpreted tongues seem to be equivalent to prophecy (1 Cor. 14:1–5). We have firm evidence that the gifts of apostleship and prophecy have ended, and thus a cessationist position is more credible.

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